

A THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION OF ACQUISITION REFORM

Dr. Deborah F. Frank

The federal government acquisition process is continually changing. It responds to constant shifts in national and international situations. Culver, in *Federal Government Procurement—An Uncharted Course Through Turbulent Waters*, gives a historical perspective of the U.S. procurement process, from colonial times onward (1985). It reflects continual turbulence and attempts to adapt to a changing environment. Placed in historical perspective, today's reforms continue the trends of the past 220 years.

Acquisition reform is today's hot topic. It's the latest effort to improve the acquisition system. But before we reform it, we must first understand why we are doing so. What are the objectives? Reform for whose purposes? Who are the reforms for? Whose needs does the system currently meet and hope to meet? What realistic alternatives exist? In his remarks to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Paul G. Kaminski stated that acquisition reform ought to make us more efficient, improve our business practices, and allow us to buy more with less (1995).

In this reform process, we must remember the forces that drive the current state of acquisition: protect military uses against poor workmanship, protect the public against fraud and abuse, and advance certain socioeconomic goals. Given the objective of acquisition reform and the forces that drive the acquisition process, it is no wonder the reform effort evokes such discussion, analysis, and review.

May you live in interesting times.

—Chinese benediction

We are in a time of reform. Private industry has been thrust into a global marketplace that demands maximum efficiency. This need for efficiency has resulted in a recognition and

embrace of attempts to maximize productivity. In this regard, reengineering has emerged as a highly successful procedure to maximize organizational productivity.

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In “Acquisition Reform: A Mandate for Change,” former Secretary of Defense William Perry (1994) concludes “... DoD has been able to develop and acquire the best weapons and support systems in the world. DoD and contractor personnel accomplished this feat not because of the (acquisition) system, but in spite of it. And they did so at a price ... the nation can no longer afford to pay....”

Recommendations for the reform of the government’s acquisition process are generally directed at specific elements within the system (i.e., numbers of workers, dollar threshold for contracting, use of standard items). This attempt at reform of isolated elements will improve the acquisition system, to some extent. Yet a look at other organizations’ attempts at reform reflects a different approach. Although the government is seriously pursuing acquisition reform, when compared to other organizational streamlining efforts, its approach appears limited in scope.

The current government acquisition reform effort seems to model the industrial sector effort via the use of reengineering. But if we consider the federal acquisition process against a theoretical construct of systems theory, we can establish that factors and influences exist for government that are absent in the industrial sector. These factors may explain two things: why reengineering is not working as quickly in government as in industry, and why the continual parade of

acquisition reform efforts over time has failed to “reform.”

This article looks at the current acquisition reform effort. We’ll consider the influence of the industrial reengineering movement in terms of the attempt to apply that process to government acquisition. The entire process will be viewed against a construct of system theory to assess influences that might exist beyond the reaches of the current acquisition effort.

PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM

The Military Acquisition Subcommittee meets this morning to begin a series of hearings on acquisition policy and reform and ... whether we can really do it at this time. One could argue we have been attempting to reform the acquisition system for decades, dating all the way back to the Hoover Commission on up to the Packard Commission and the Defense Management Review. I am encouraged that we may have an opportunity that we never had before.

—U.S. Congress (1994), p. 1

The U.S. acquisition system has been burdened with many obvious criticisms for years. There are the routinely quoted

Dr. Deborah F. Frank is Chief, Business Management Office PEO Command, Control, and Communications, Department of the Army. She holds a B.A. degree in sociology, an M.A. degree in education, an M.S. degree in national resource strategy from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, and an Ed.D. degree in administration from Rutgers University. She sits on the Board of Directors of the First Atlantic Federal Credit Union.

problems of contractor overpricing for simple items. There is the common perception by Americans that “the government” does things the hard way. There are also the more obvious signs that reflect a concern with the U.S. acquisition system. The Comptroller General report, “Weapons Acquisition: A Rare Opportunity for Lasting Change,” verifies that almost continual taskings of commissions and task forces are examining the system to determine problems and recommended solutions (Comptroller General, 1990).

The National Performance Review began in 1993 when President Bill Clinton announced a six-month review of the federal government. The Report of the National Performance Review documented a process that was intended to change federal government operations. The process followed a logical sequence of cutting red tape, putting customers first, empowering employees, and getting back to basics. This reform effort has taken on the mantle of reengineering, with the intent of assess-

ing current acquisition processes and seeking more effective, efficient ways of doing business.

Reform is not a new word in the Department of Defense (DoD) vocabulary. Since the 1950s acquisition reform has been attempted, without much success. The reform efforts of the sixties were initiated by Robert McNamara in an attempt to “fix” the procurement system. Table 1 shows there has been a series of reforms since then (McNaugher, 1990).

Reforms have addressed such issues as better planning, increased centralization, simplified reporting chain, better cost estimates, additional executive-level personnel, inclusion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, increased milestone approvals, and funding and program stability.¹ Yet the system resists significant change. The evolution of the “acquisition reform waterfall” results from the lack of success. Why is there a continual parade of reform initiatives? Each of these initiatives has championed sound management, but failed to recog-

Year	Initiative
1961	McNamara initiatives
1970	Fitzhugh Commission
1972	Commission on Government Procurement
1976	OMB Circular A-109
1978	Defense Science Board Acquisition Cycle Study
1979	Defense Resources Management Study
1981	Defense Acquisition Improvement Program
1983	Grace Commission
1986	Packard Commission
1986	Goldwater Nichols
1989	Defense Management Review

Table 1. Reform Initiatives

nize the existence of the “acquisition culture,” the environment in which all of the participants operate (McNaugher, 1990, p. 188):

Reformers have spent a good deal of time and effort since the 1950s trying to centralize, simplify, and stabilize the weapons acquisition process. Yet the process somehow defies centralization and stabilization, and if anything it grows more rather than less complicated ... An important part of the problem can be attributed to the political milieu in which reform occurs.

The repudiation of past reform efforts does not end there (Gregory, 1989, p. xii):

Reform of weapon-acquisition systems has produced precious little by way of improvement. Incessant finger pointing, second-guessing, scandal brandishing, regulation writing, and general viewing with alarm have produced an atmosphere of distrust—hardly conducive to getting the job done....

Finally, a 1986 survey by Arthur D. Little reported that there is a perception that the acquisition process is so cumbersome that it is unlikely that it can ever function in its present form. It is beyond repair in its present state. To succeed, the reformers must not only recognize this culture, but also have the ability to effect change. Despite commissions and Congressional interest and continual DoD directives and changes, the U.S. acquisition

system continues to function under a heavy burden of regulation and bureaucratic inefficiencies.²

Past reform efforts were instituted on a regular basis. Each of the efforts resulted in additional recommendations, regulations, and personnel. The President’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Defense Management recognized this problem (Gansler, 1991, p. 14):

In general we discovered these problems [acquisition inefficiencies] were seldom the result of fraud or dishonesty. Rather they were symptomatic of the underlying problems that affect the entire acquisition system. Ironically, actions being prescribed in law and regulation to correct [the problems] tend to exacerbate the underlying issues by making acquisition procedures even more inflexible and by removing whatever motivation exists for the exercise of individual judgment.

Yet the reform parade continues. Evidently the results of the reform efforts have not effected significant or lasting or effective or desirable change. Some point is being missed, the source of the problem is not being addressed, the “easy” solutions are being implemented. Or the real problem is not identified.

The problem must be identified and analyzed in a different fashion. To effect change of a process, to alter the output of product, we must identify the inputs to that process. By identifying inputs, the makeup of the process can be clearly analyzed and a better understanding of its rationale can be developed. This identification, once

done, can suggest which inputs should be changed or if they can be changed. Without assessing inputs that make up an output, the process cannot change.

CHANGE

*The only people who like change
are wet babies.*

—Sir Brian Wolfson

The federal government is not the only institution seeking answers on how best to change. American companies constantly search for ways to improve their operations. Surveys suggest that companies are constantly undertaking programs, initiatives, or projects to improve organizational performance. Of 200 companies in a recent survey, 42% initiated 11 or more projects within the past five years (*Management Review*, Spitzer and Tobia, 1994). This validates the premise that companies are willing to undergo the turbulence of change in search of improved performance, profits, and worker motivation.

Firms create advantage by discovering new and better ways to compete in the industry and bring it to market. This represents innovation, including improvements in technology and better ways of doing things. It is reflected in product and process change, new approaches to marketing, and new forms of distribution. This change is based more on an accumulation of small insights than on technological breakthroughs.

Change is difficult. In a corporation there will be any number of “customers” who will resist the change. Many parties—

stockholders, the board of directors, vendors, management, public relations—have a vested interest in maintaining the system as it is, for any number of reasons. Manganelli and Klein (1994) maintain that change within an organization must be mandated by senior management, at the least, and “worked” with the customers, at least those maintaining power within the organization. They, like Hammer and Champy (1993), also stress the “rapid” and “radical” approach to business reengineering. They assert that anything less will result in failed improvement programs.

A THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

An analysis of this subject must be based on an understanding of a theory that is applicable to its structure, process, or operational mode. This allows us to appreciate the current situation, variables that may influence the subject, and we may have the basis for some projections. To logically analyze a system or process, it must be placed against a theoretical framework. In this fashion, aspects of operational system can be more thoroughly studied and projections can be made based on definable data.

I believe that a theoretical assessment of a problem is necessary before one can propose effective alternative solutions. A look at the current acquisition process against a theoretical framework will help us understand process flow and give us an opportunity to consider possible inputs and outputs. We will therefore have a better understanding of the forces that drive a process, and in turn, the results of that process.

SYSTEMS APPROACH (WHAT GOES IN MUST COME OUT)

The system theory is a rather basic process presuming that, with certain input, there is a certain, predictable output. The same input will continue to result in the same output unless there is some disruption to the process. That is, unless other inputs change or interact in a different fashion.

Beishon and Peters state that “the systems approach has been adopted by social psychologists as a basis for studying organizations.” According to these authors, there is an increasing trend in adapting the systems approach to organizational theory and management practices. This

adaptation does not purport to display an exhaustive analysis of the management practice; rather, it provides an illustration that

“The system theory is a rather basic process presuming that, with certain input, there is a certain, predictable output.”

will assist in analysis and evaluation.

Emery (1969) states that “the essential characteristic of a system is that it is composed of interacting parts, each of which has interest in its own right.” This is the key to the systems theory and the key to this analysis on acquisition reform. Emery continues that the interacting parts are the significant factor in this theory and influence the behavior of the system. A given system component transforms inputs into outputs, presumably contributing to the accomplishment of a desired purpose of the system.

What are the inputs to our acquisition system? Can we define the elements that

make the U.S. acquisition system unique? In the quest for more efficiency, other countries have assessed inputs to their acquisition systems and altered inputs as necessary. Houston (1994) states that these efforts have resulted in more efficient and effective acquisition processes. These studies focus on government control, budgetary process, workforce training, relationships with contractors, and legislative oversight. These factors are some of the key drivers in the definition of a unique acquisition system.

The Comptroller General report (1990) concludes that an “acquisition culture” exists throughout DoD.

This culture can be defined as behavior ... of participants in the acquisition process DoD and Congress—and forces motivating behavior. The process is an interaction of participants rather than methodological procedure.

Given this acquisition culture, participants operate within its formal and informal rules and expectations. Roles and rules are defined; the importance of winning is understood. Program survival is intertwined with participants’ needs—all participants. These include the military services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), which feel a need to perpetuate a mission; contractors, who want to sustain business and acquire profits; overseeing organizations, which want to find and fix problems; Congress, which needs to satisfy the public (and individual members, their constituencies); and program managers, who want to maintain or enhance their reputations. To further complicate the culture, the short-term involve-

ment of many participants encourages short-term payoffs.

The integrated management framework is an interchange of the three functions of budgeting, acquisition, and requirements. These functions give customers from different arenas (Congress, the services, regulatory agencies, and OSD) an opportunity to play in the acquisition process. Each player brings his own agenda and has the power to influence the operation of the acquisition. Our acquisition system reflects the government and political systems in which it exists.

All systems have certain inputs that contribute to the peculiar system that results. These inputs include such diverse elements as cultural expectations, regulatory requirements, customers and stakeholders, budgetary processes, and political pressures. I will explore the U.S. acquisition system in light of a systems theory, which will shed light on its strengths and weaknesses, and help define the parameters that must be considered in acquisition reform.

Given a systems theory and a general understanding of the key factors (inputs) in an acquisition system, what now? If we are so anxious to improve our acquisition system, a serious effort can be made to adjust input and environment to create a more efficient, effective organization.

THE SYSTEM WORKS !

The problem is, simply, that the current acquisition system works. Given a parochial view of the acquisition system in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, it certainly has its problems. This is routinely recognized and documented; there is no

need to pursue that avenue here. But when viewed from the larger perspective, and when one considers the many players in the acquisition process, the system is successful for the customers. Significant changes will affect these players (who have considerable power), and they may be reluctant to embrace another system.

The “success” of the system is well documented. Some express concerns that certain customers, small businesses, minority contractors, and suppliers profit from the current system, and thus may attempt to derail efforts at acquisition reform. But the point here is not limited to profiteering. These players, as well as many others, have established themselves in an ac-

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quisition system that provides status, power, influence, and opportunities for success, as well as financial rewards. The system works for them and they will resist change that alters this type of return.

Forman puts forth an interesting proposition in “Wanted: A Constituency for Acquisition Reform” (1994). She asserts that there are continuing calls for reform from all arenas; all parties agree that the acquisition process is inefficient. But the reason our system has not been changed is because the system is working the way its customers want it to.

The military are the most visible customers. Given the current system, their influence and power are allowed to expand. Each service controls its own destiny by controlling its own acquisition. Defense contractors are also very inter-

ested in maintaining a system in which they can sustain operations as well as make profits. Any changes in the acquisition system may modify this capability. Another customer is the Congress. Given the current process, members of Congress can influence military acquisition programs and provide jobs for their states' citizens. Additionally, they may appear in the role of reformer in their efforts to "clean up the system." The media also benefits from the current system by grandstanding any actual or perceived problem in the system, alerting the public to fraud, waste, and abuse. Small business is also comfortable with the system in its assurance of continuing awards for their markets.

Considering these inputs to our acquisition system, one can see that the call for

"A larger, more potent factor emerges that influences, indeed controls, the acquisition process—politics."

reform must be supported by a diversity of customers so as to overcome these vested interests. Forman maintains that any change to the

acquisition process must overcome these entrenched areas first. Acquisition reform advocates also recognize this dilemma. Many authors have expressed concern regarding the entrenched interests of special interests such as small business, minority contractors, suppliers, media and others that profit from the current system.

A recent Government Accounting Office (GAO) report suggests that acquisition funds are among the most discretionary in the DoD budget. This sole factor must make these funds particularly appealing to politicians, whose existence is determined by constituents, and whose elec-

tions are supported by powerful lobbyists and political action committees, which often represent defense contractors. This relationship involves politicians in the acquisition process. Add to that formula the distasteful downsizing and decrease of the defense budget—where more hands chase fewer dollars.

POLITICS

In the above discussion it becomes apparent that inputs to the acquisition process cannot be readily changed. The process is meeting the needs of those involved. A larger, more potent factor emerges that influences, indeed controls, the acquisition process—politics. This author believes that the political environment is a critical factor in the acquisition process. To modify the defense acquisition process, one must consider the role of politics. An attempt to influence the current process without assessing political influence will fail.

Political involvement in the acquisition process began 220 years ago. Congress received virtually every power over the budget via Article I of the Constitution. Since that beginning, the involvement of Congress within the DoD budgeting and acquisition cycle has increased.³ The result of this evolution is that Congress is increasingly involved in defense budget details. In the period from 1980 to 1990, the number of line item changes made by Congress in the Defense budget rose from 1,500 to more than 2,500. The effect of this degree of micromanagement is that Congress decides what programs are killed, supported, or modified. This feeds the Congressional need to "feed" its con-

stituents. A telling comment by a member of Congress summed up the acquisition reform problem. “We can’t reform the Pentagon until we reform ourselves.”⁴

The increasing degree of political involvement is obvious in the changes to the DoD budget request between funding requested by the military and the amounts appropriated by Congress (Table 2) (Comptroller General, 1990). This requirement for increased visibility demonstrates the ever-growing interest and involvement of the political system in the federal acquisition process. By maintaining visibility, Congress can more easily influence, and possibly control, decision making and funding distribution (Adelman and Augustine, 1990).⁵

A recent example of the political influence on the acquisition process is reflected in the reform process itself. DoD designed a far-reaching acquisition reform proposal. Although it reflected an ambitious effort for acquisition reform, it attempted to eliminate too much (politically) in the way of social regulation. This proved to be politically unacceptable. An acquisition reform bill was passed, but it was not as

ambitious as the proposal supported by DoD.

Another significant political influence on the acquisition process is the Defense budget. The current decreasing trend in the size of the budget suggests that congressional representatives will attempt to maintain or even increase their influence over the acquisition process. The significant changes in the budget are reflected in Table 3 (Schick, 1995).

These Congressional issues affect the defense acquisition process. Intervention by the legislative and executive branches of the government may meet their needs—political, economic, or social—but the result for the acquisition process is constant turbulence. This turbulence is a critical factor in decreasing the management capabilities at the appropriate levels. This in turn feeds the perception that program managers cannot manage their programs, in turn feeding the perception that higher level managerial “help” is needed. Norm Augustine contends that “turbulence in the defense acquisition management process must be eliminated” (Adelman and Augustine, 1990).

Year	Auth	Appro	Total
1980	300	1200	1500
1982	350	1200	1550
1984	900	1500	2400
1986	1350	1800	3150
1988	1250	1700	2950
1990	1150	1350	2500

Source: Comptroller General of the United States (1990).

Table 2. Congressional Changes to DoD Budget Request

Year	Outlay FY87\$ (B)	Percent Change	Defense Percent
1960	220		52
1965	204	-7	43
1970	263	29	42
1975	184	-30	26
1980	187	2	23
1985	261	40	27
1990	273	5	24
1995	207	-24	18
1999*	175	-16	14
*Projected Source: Schick, A. (1995).			

Table 3. Defense Outlays and Percentage of Total Outlay

The ever-increasing Congressional interest in terms of micro-management, budget, and political concerns remains a growing issue. This Congressional oversight is a critical input in the acquisition process. This influence affects and in some respects controls the acquisition process. This micromanagement is increasing while calls for acquisition reform and simplification and reengineering continue; but increasing Congressional management and acquisition reform are irreconcilable goals.

In a consideration of the systems theory applied to the acquisition process, political interests are a major input. The political influence affects the acquisition process. This political input affects all activity and introduces a culture that must be understood to appreciate the acquisition process. The system cannot be changed unless the inputs are changed.

Obviously some of the inputs into the system are more influential than others. Based on the power of political input—its control of regulation, budget, reporting, and approval—it is the most influential in shaping the acquisition process. Any reform of this acquisition process should consider this input and acknowledge its influence of the system.

Our political system is structured so that competing branches of government intersect with one another. Originally instituted as a system of checks and balances, these branches of government hamper efficiency and reform. Managerial reform efforts are complicated, and possibly convoluted, by the interaction of the political system. So any attempt for centralization within one branch of the government is fought by one of the other branches. Similarly, any reform effort to minimize political influence in the acquisition system

will be fought by the branches of the government.

The costs of politicization have been high. Increasingly dominated by the short-term perspective of the political process, the acquisition process makes basic mistakes in the allocation of resources to research and development, where a long-term perspective is required. increasingly dominated by the pork-barrel decision rules of American politics ... where flexibility and decisiveness are required.

McNaugher (1989, p. 15) goes on to assert that “effective reform would require fundamental change in the relationship between the political system and the acquisition process.”

REFORMING THE REFORM PROCESS

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) say that, to reinvent government, the incentives that drive public institutions must be changed. An analysis must be performed on the institution to assess what elements of the market need to be improved to make it work.

Political influence must be acknowledged in the acquisition reform process. Politics is the environment within which the process functions. Unless the political influence is acknowledged, no significant, lasting change can be made. This includes Congressional interest of all types, budget controls, reporting requirements, constituent interest, and contractor interest. These are powerful influences.

The United States could also modify its acquisition system. But any modification, however small or large, would require the support and approval of the “customers” who provide the input to the process. The change will be neither easy nor comfortable for the parties involved. Reform would require a change in the inputs to the acquisition process; a change in the relationship between customers and the acquisition process. Most significantly, reform would require a change in the relationship between the political system and the acquisition process.

The critical change would be the political dimension. Intensive Congressional micromanagement influences the federal acquisition process. This control causes delay and risk-averse actions on the part of those who are responsible—the program managers.

Gregory (1989) discusses this increased involvement by Congress. He says that the role of Congress should be that of a board of directors, not managers. But Congress has become so involved in the

acquisition process that it has lost its objectivity as a reviewing authority. Until Congress recognizes this conflict and removes itself from acquisition management, the problem will continue. Thus, this one significant input into the acquisition system will continue making real reform impossible.

There appears to be a consensus that the acquisition reform process must address all factors influencing the output. Additionally, one must face the political

“Political influence must be acknowledged in the acquisition reform process.”

environment that so heavily influences the acquisition process. If changes are not made to the political aspect, then, based on the history of acquisition reform, we can probably assume that changes made to other inputs will result in a marginal return. Corporate America has effectively used the reengineering process to introduce needed innovations. But reengineering has the ability to effect change to all necessary inputs in the corporate world. I do not believe this to be true in the federal acquisition process. Politics cannot be ignored as a critical factor in the acquisition game. The theoretical structure of the system, with its second- and third-order effects, must be recognized before any meaningful change can take place. McNaugher (1989, p. 86) reaches this same conclusion.

It remains to be seen whether some reforms might succeed where others so far have failed. Clearly, however, far more radical reorganization is in order, a reorganization that basically alters the relationship between the political system and the acquisition process. As troubled as politicians may be by features of the acquisition process, the political system as a whole has so far been unwilling to contemplate change this great. Reluctance is not surprising; a political system accustomed to muddling through will probably engage in radical reform only in response to massive failure. And the fact is, the failures of the acquisition process tend to appear on the margins.

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ENDNOTES

1. In 1985, in response to media accounts of fraud, waste, and abuse, the President established the Blue Ribbon Commission on Defense Management. The major recommendations of the commission were: the establishment of an Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, the establishment of a service acquisition executive for each service, and the appointment of program executive officers. All recommendations were aimed at DoD's management policies and procedures.
2. McNaugher discusses, in detail, reform attempts since McNamara. In summary, the results of reform have led to an imposition of political values on the weapons development process. He concludes that reform efforts have been counterproductive.
3. Shilman (1988) discusses the history of the Congressional budget process, its evolution, and current status.
4. Wildavsky (1987) reviews the current Congressional committee structure and discusses how this structure contributes even further to the involvement of Congress in the DoD budget and acquisition process.
5. Adelman and Augustine discuss the defense procurement mess that results from Congressional micromanagement. They provide examples that show this to be an increasing trend.

